



ARE WE KNOWN FOR OUR PARTIES?

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Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

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Some of you met my friend Kim Long when she was at Brick this fall to speak about our newly revised Book of Common Worship. Kim has written a book about Christian Marriage and when she was researching her subject, she decided to travel to that mecca of marriage, Las Vegas, to see what she could learn. While there, Kim met some of the people waiting in a long line to obtain a marriage license: A mother, with her 18 year-old son and his pregnant bride-to-be; a Spanish-speaking couple and their friends who came along to translate; a British couple with two kids in tow, starting a second marriage they hoped would be entirely different than their first marriages had been. She saw folks in line who looked like they had been up all night playing the slots and a few middle-aged people trying to get it right this time.

Kim then visited a place called ‘A Little White Wedding Chapel,’ one of the oldest such establishments in the city. It is run by a woman who has been in the business for 54 years and keeps to her high standards, employing properly ordained clergy—no internet ordinations allowed. She offers a variety of options for weddings suited to a couple’s taste...and budget. In addition to that ‘Little White Wedding Chapel---which is little and white, by the way, with painted pews, a church organ in back and room up front for the minister, the photographer, and Elvis, there are four other chapels. Also available is the Tunnel of Love Drive-Thru, where couples can make their vows without exiting their vehicles. The owner came up with that idea after seeing a disabled couple struggle to exit their car and navigate the buildings.¹



Now, Cana is a long way from Vegas. It was a little one-camel town 10 miles north of where Jesus was from. Cana is so unremarkable, it is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament except in John's Gospel—here in chapter 2 where this wedding took place and again in chapter 4 when Jesus heals a royal official's son who is near death. The wedding and that healing are the first two of seven 'signs,' as John's Gospel calls them. These signs, or epiphanies, reveal God's glory, God's great intentions in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Now, you'd think that with 2 of the 7 signs occurring in Cana, that town could have capitalized on such notoriety...but instead it faded to its former anonymity and is never mentioned again.

It has made a bit of a comeback, though, in our time. The Catholic Church offers 'Pre-Cana' counseling for engaged couples. An Episcopal Church has the Cana Wedding Guild that provides assistance to clergy, the organist and the couple to ensure that these "special days go smoothly." St. Peter the Apostle Church in Texas offers for rental 'The Cana Ballroom' complete with breathtaking views, outdoor patios and flexible catering options.

The unnamed couple in our story could have used the assistance of the Cana Wedding Guild and a flexible catering plan, too, so that their day might have gone more smoothly! In the first century, weddings could be a 7-day celebration hosted by the groom's family. No wonder people could run out of wine!

Jesus' first sign in the Gospel of John is loaded with symbols: a wedding feast, thirty guests, six stone jars holding water for ritual cleansing, and wine. These potent symbols create a story of over-the-top generosity where Jesus the guest becomes Jesus the Host. Suddenly, we are at *the* Wedding Banquet to top all wedding banquets. Those six stone jars filled with water become 120-180 gallons of wine, enough to quench the thirst of every invited guest and a lot of wedding-crashers, too! The solution given far exceeds the problem posed, but there is still more to this miracle: the wine Jesus gives is not the cheap stuff handed out once the guests have gotten tipsy. No, the wine from Jesus is fine wine; it is, in fact, it is the *best* wine.



From the start of John's Gospel, then, we learn from this epiphany that with Jesus, there is always *more* and *better* still to come.

Isn't that the message, the hope, of every wedding? That the exquisite beauty and overflowing love of the wedding day is only the beginning of more and better still to come. The promise of marriage is surely this: that the more we know of one another, the deeper our love will become. And for so many couples this is exactly true. But the opposite also happens. For reasons mundane or spectacular, love fails. Little irritations set in, unintended hurts are inflicted, sometimes an irreconcilable difference is faced; and the candlelight glow of the wedding day changes over time into the glare of a fluorescent bulb.

Though our own ability to love can be fickle and faltering, it is not so with the God we come to know in Jesus. Years ago, I heard a Scottish preacher say of this text: The more we know of Christ, the more in him we find to love. And then he assured us of the astounding good news that the more Christ comes to know of *us*, the more in *us* he finds to love as well. God's love never runs out.

That Scottish preacher became quite passionate about this text, saying emphatically: "Christ has come to change water into wine! To make all of life more colorful, more joyful, more abundant! Why then," he asked, "do we so often act as if Jesus came instead to change wine into water?!"ⁱⁱ

John, chapter 2, reveals to us that Jesus has come to bring abundant joy and life to us; to change water into wine. As early as the year 431 C.E., this text was lifted up by the church as an Epiphany text worthy of our attention. In the 1600s, it was the subject of a poetry contest at Cambridge University. Students were given three hours to compose a poem, in Latin, based on the wedding at Cana. At the end of the three hours, one student, Richard Crashaw, handed in his paper. Upon it, he had written one line. Translated from the Latin, it read: "The shame-faced water saw its Lord, and blushed."ⁱⁱⁱ Crashaw won the prize.



Christ has come to make change water into wine; to make all of life more colorful, more joyful, more abundant. To transform our shame into the blush of love.

The Bible itself is a record of God's abundance among us. The sweep of Scripture tells of God's generosity in the fruitfulness of creation, in freedom from slavery, manna in the wilderness, a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, a glad return from exile. But Scripture also records our failure to trust that God's generosity will be sufficient to meet our needs. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, we have been given the liturgy of abundance, but we live according to the myth of scarcity.^{iv}

Jesus' very first sign, turning water into an astounding amount of fine wine, will be followed by more and more signs of God's glory, of all that Christ has come to do: 5,000 people fed with five loaves and two fish; blind people see, lame people walk, lepers are cleansed; the poor are set free from their debts; sins are forgiven; and the dead are raised.

Our companion text from Isaiah is no less astounding. Here the despair of long exile is broken by a new announcement infused with exuberant language: The people of Judah will be restored! They will return home! They thought God had abandoned them forever but now, like water in the wilderness, water into wine, God changes everything. The estranged silence ends. God initiates a renewal of vows. This change of status for Judah is so dramatic they are given a new name. They had been termed 'Forsaken' but now are called 'My Delight is in her.' Enemies derided them as 'Desolate'...but in God's abundance, their land is now called, 'Married.' In Hebrew it is Beulah Land...the song of joyful homecoming. Robert Brearley, retired now as the pastor of St. Simon's Presbyterian Church, says that we Christians "ought to be preoccupied with parties, banquets, feasts and merriment. We ought to give ourselves over to veritable orgies of joy because we have been liberated from the fear of life and the fear of death. We ought to attract people to the church quite literally by the fun there is in being a Christian."^v Yet, too often we in the church bear greater resemblance to this quote from William

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



Sloane Coffin: “...if only one-tenth of what we Christians believed were true, we still ought to be ten times as excited as we are.”^{vi}

Now, here at Brick I suppose we *are* known for our parties. Our summer barbeques, the Fall Fling. And the famous Dinner Dance is coming up soon—buy your tickets now! Yet even here, we can become too serious and solemn, as though the only appropriate colors for worship are our blacks and grays. And if our joy is mostly shared inwardly, then we miss the opportunity to share with others the abundance of God’s provisions. Did you notice, after all, to whom Jesus’ first sign is revealed? Not to the main characters, the bride and groom; nor to their families; nor even to Jesus’ own disciples first. The first people to see what Jesus did...is doing...will do...are the servants. The ones who most need the world to be rearranged with God’s joy and abundance and justice; who most need debts to be forgiven; and death-dealing forces to be overturned by resurrection. The glory of God is often noticed best by those who need it most. What might happen to us if we attended not only the parties we throw for ourselves, but also joined the party, the banquet and celebration of our Wednesday Night Dinner Program in Watson Hall or the meals with the Jan Hus community?

As it turns out, Kim Long found some things to appreciate about those Vegas wedding chapels: like how they meet people where they are, as they are, without judgment or regard to one’s station in life and offer them a space for joyful and glad celebration.

Among the most meaningful weddings I have ever performed, one was for a couple who were older. Both had seen more of death than anyone should have to bear—each had endured the death of a spouse, each had lost a child, one of them a grandchild, too. Forsaken: they knew how that felt. Desolate: they had lived at that address. Then, one day, they met each other...and over time, to their astonishment, Delight returned. Color, joy, abundance appeared...and they were Married. They became a sign for others that Christ has come to change water into wine; sin into forgiveness, and death into life. Scarcity overwhelmed by God’s generosity.



In little Cana, of all places, Jesus performed his very first sign—an epiphany of the joy, color, and abundant life God intends for everyone—when He changed water into wine. It was an invitation, I think, to the life He intends for all creation. It is still the invitation He offers: “Here is the cup,” He said. “Drink ye, all of it.”

Amen.

ⁱ Kimberly Bracken Long, “White Limos, Red Velvet, and Elvis: What Vegas (and Disney) Can Teach Us about Weddings.”

ⁱⁱ The Reverend Dr. Stuart McWilliam was a visiting professor from Scotland at Columbia Theological Seminary in the early 1980s. He preached this text in our chapel and I kept notes I made during his sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. McWilliam told this story in his sermon. Over the years, I have sought its documentation. The poem itself is quoted in various places, with variations. Apparently it can be found in a collection of poems by Richard Crashaw: *Epigrammata Sacra* with this, in Latin, “*Aque in Virnum Versae.*”

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, “*The Liturgy of Abundance and the Myth of Scarcity,*” in **Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 69.

^v Robert M. Brearley, *Pastoral Perspective on John 2:1-11* in **Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 262, 264. This quote is by Robert Hotchkiss, cited in Brennan Manning’s *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1990), 143-144.

^{vi} “On Changing Water into Wine,” a sermon preached on February 5, 1978 in **The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Vol. 1** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 41.